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Learner Autonomy: CSRE Approach-the Launching Pad

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Abstract

There has been a marked shift within the field of language learning and teaching over the past two decades with greater emphasis being put on learners and learning rather than on teachers and teaching. This shift requires redefining the role of teachers, teaching methods and the learning materials. Learning doesn't occur in vacuum and learner autonomy doesn't happen automatically. Teachers play a major interactive role with both the learners and learning environment. They use effective strategies and suitable materials to enhance the learning process but at times with little success. What is required: the proper groundwork, the platform, the launching pad which will encourage the students to open up, act freely and autonomously? CSRE approach might help in preparing and fostering the students' motivational level. This is an all-inclusive approach that not only serves the average learners but also encourages the slow learners to participate in the classroom activities. Teachers are ever learners. This paper evaluates the prevalent teaching learning process based on the extensive interaction with the learners and teachers spanning around thirty years' of tryst within the theoretical framework.

Keywords: Motivation; Learner Autonomy; Teacher Autonomy; Teachers as Co-Learners; Rapport.

1. Introduction

Teaching English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) has changed tremendously in past decades. Curriculum, teaching methods and teaching materials have been developed to meet the changing needs of the ESL/EFL population. The most common problem for the ESL/EFL teacher is interacting with a dull, unresponsive class, which avoids any dealing with the teachers.

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The whole class appears to be silent spectator and this is truly a very frustrating experience for both the teacher and the taught.

It further adds to teacher's woe when the students who understand the question even do not answer and keep quite. This happens because of either unconducive classroom environment, unapproachable teacher, shyness, lack of confidence, lack of proper support, fear of making mistakes or fear of embarrassment before the class.

This article attempts to explore the very basic principles that teachers hardly care and the result is not up to the mark in spite of their use of multiple teaching techniques and strategies. The basic principles of care, share, rapport and engagement which this article emphasizes; might provide the platform or the launching pad which can energize, activate and motivate the class to act, react, risk and respond.

1.1. Language Classroom & Lack of Motivation

Motivation is the key to all learning. It has magical effect and creates wonder in language learning. Let us see and examine in brief what is motivation and how does it work? Motivation is indeed a complex, multifaceted concept. This article describes how motivation manifests itself in the modern classroom and how motivation can be applied positively to the arsenal of tools used by educators in an effort to develop the optimal learning environment. The underachiever problem that seems to be pervasive in classrooms around much of the world is poorly understood. Teachers interpret underachievers as a challenge to their authority. They react to this problem by enforcing punitive measures which usually create a vicious circle of behavior violations and punishments. The final result is an exacerbation of the classroom disruption. The underlying reasons for under achievement are either not understood or simply ignored by many teachers. Underachievers can thrive in the secure, supportive environment that motivates them to be bold and confident. Motivation works slowly but surely [1, 2, and 3].

It is in fact very difficult to have a single definition of motivation, but a few of the well-known definitions might feed us the flavor of the pudding. The main idea of motivation is to capture the child's attention and curiosity and channel their energy towards learning [4, 5]. According to Gardener (1985), motivation is concerned with the question, "Why does an organism behave as it does [6]?" Dornyei rightly notes, "Teacher skills in motivating learners should be seen as central to teaching effectiveness [7]." According to the Webster's, "to motivate means to provide with a motive, a need or desire that causes a person to act." "Motivation determines the extent of the learner's active involvement and attitude towards learning [8]." Crookes and Schmidt believe, "Motivation has been identified as the learner's orientation with regard to the goal of learning a second language [9]." Last but not the least, Dornyei further emphasizes, "Teacher behavior is a powerful motivational tool." These quotes from various educationist and researchers clearly indicate the importance and effectiveness of motivation in teaching and learning activities. "Many researchers consider motivation as one of the main elements that determine success in developing a second or foreign language; it determines the extent of active, personal involvement in second language learning [10, 11]."

Lack of motivation is perhaps the biggest obstacle faced by language teachers. Behavioral problem in the

classroom often or always seen to be linked to the lack of motivation. It would be difficult to point to a single factor which would account for the apparent changing levels of motivation and involvement [12]. There are many factors which affect students' commitment level to language learning. Some of these factors are:

- Classroom environment
- Unfriendly classmates
- Unapproachable teacher
- Difficult subject material
- Improper teaching
- Fear of failure and mistakes
- Unclear about learning goals
- Responsibilities other than study
- Feeling isolated
- Previous negative experiences
- Mismatch between the knowledge, beliefs & interests
- Family or personal problems
- Poor health
- Lack of proper support
- Lack of confidence

These above factors in many ways interplay and multiply day after day and lead the students to a state where they might feel:

- ANXIOUS
- CONFUSED
- UNCERTAIN
- ISOLATED
- FRUSTRATED
- ANGRY
- DEPRESSED
- UNCARED
- PASSIVE

1.2. Teachers & Motivational Strategies

In these situations a good teacher's role expands multifold to contain these demotivating factors and bring the students back on the track where they might feel like learning and doing assignments. Teachers should resort to different, new, fresh methods and techniques to energize the class and make the learners confident of what they are learning and achieving. It is not so easy for a teacher but not impossible to achieve.

Teachers' skill in motivating students to learn is of paramount importance. They can employ a variety of techniques, strategies at the Language level, the Learner level and the Learning situation level in order to motivate their students. Here are some of the main strategies and techniques that teachers have in their arsenal to use at the right moment and at the right target. Careful attention to these factors in the instructional setting enhances the possibilities for creating and ensuring conducive learning environment. When learners realize that their teacher recognizes their individual differences in abilities and their experiences are valued, respected, and incorporated in learning tasks and contexts, their level of motivation and sense of achievement are enhanced [13]. In short, teachers' quality personal relationships with students establishes rapport, builds trust, increases learners' sense of belonging, self-respect, self-confidence and provides a positive ambience for learning [14, 15]. Some of these strategies are:

- Create stress-free environment
- Make the language class interesting
- Set a personal example of good behavior
- Develop peer-support network
- Present the task properly
- Promote learner autonomy
- Increase learners' linguistic self-confidence
- Personalize the learning process
- Increase the learners' goal orientedness
- Take care of learners' needs, interests & motives
- Recognize the learners' 'little successes'
- Be approachable and understanding
- Use appropriate materials
- Identify learners' individual differences
- Inculcate that success comes in, 'CANS' not in 'CANTS'

2. CSRE Approach-The Launching Pad

Motivational strategies cannot work in a vacuum. There are certain preconditions to be met before any attempts to generate motivation can be effective. This approach focuses and emphasizes the teachers' attitudes towards their students. Teachers' caring and sharing attitude reduces fear and anxiety, encourages reciprocity, promotes autonomy and builds a rapport between the teacher and the students.

This relationship further creates interest, generates motivation among students and helps teachers to engage students meaningfully.

Quality personal relationships provide stability, trust and caring can increase learners' sense of belonging, self-respect, self- acceptance and provide a positive climate for learning. This is the beginning of a teaching-learning process in a stress-free atmosphere of trust and respect. Hence, this approach prepares the soil before sowing the seed of learning.

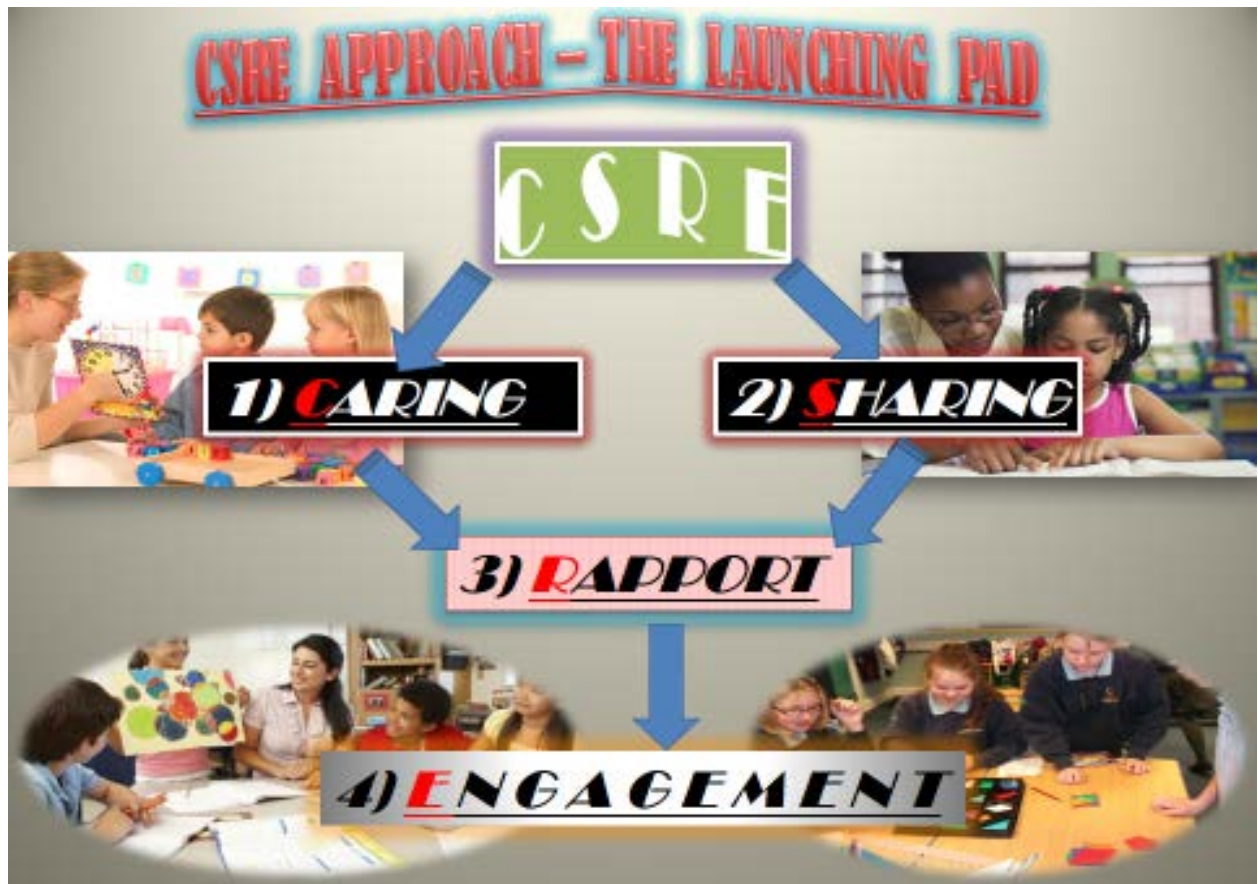


Figure 1: Courtesy: Google images

2.1. Teaching/Learning- A Two-Way Traffic

It stands reasonably true that a tense classroom climate can undermine learning and demotivate learners [16, 17, and 18].

On the other hand, learner motivation will reach at its maximum level in a safe, secure classroom environment in which students can express their opinions freely and feel that they do not run the risk of being embarrassed or ridiculed.

To be motivated to learn, students need both ample opportunities to learn and steady encouragement and support of their learning effort [19].

So, the onus primarily is on the teachers to organize and manage the classroom as an effective learning environment because anxious or alienated students are unlikely to develop motivation to learn, it is important that learning occurs within a relaxed and supportive atmosphere as Good and Brophy explain in detail in their writings [20].

In such conducive, stress-free environment, the two-way traffic starts and the shyness, the inhibitions, the fear, the chocking situation slowly evaporates. The students feel bold, confident and get motivated towards learning

the target language.

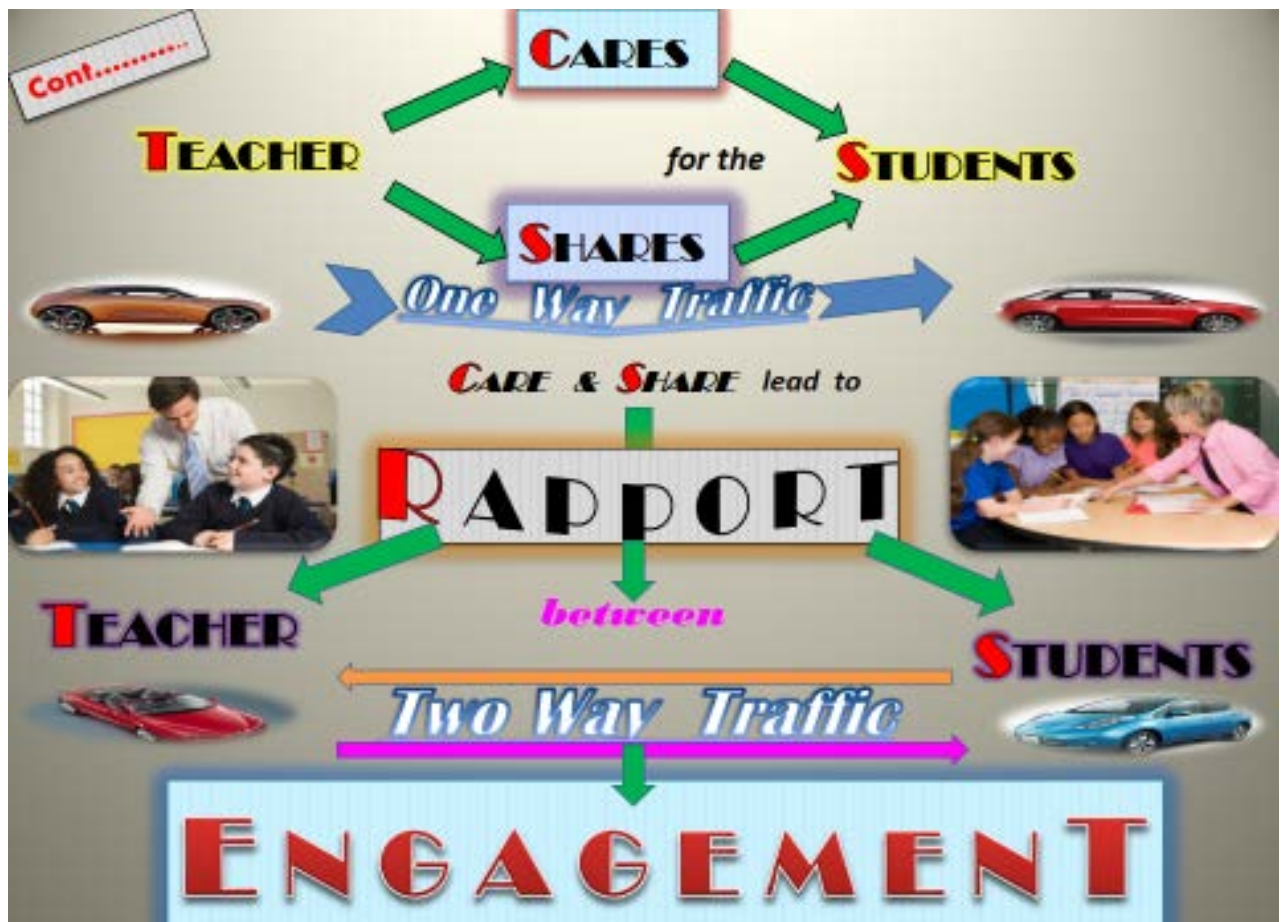


Figure 2: Courtesy: Google image

2.2. The Foundation: Teaching-Learning Process

The groundwork is done, the platform or the launching pad is ready and the plane of teaching-learning process takes off smoothly.

The students are ready to listen, to learn, to participate.

This is the time for the teacher to use his strategies tactfully to exploit maximum of opportunities of teaching-learning process.

In fact, resourceful and effective teachers do not use different strategies and techniques; they use the same strategies and techniques differently.

The two-way traffic encourages the teachers to delegate slowly the learning autonomy to the students who now with their own desire share the responsibilities of learning activities [21, 22, 23, and 24]. Thus, it sustains learners' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, which is further strengthened by teachers' suitable teaching

materials and easy-to-understand teaching techniques. All these, in turn, support and foster language learning. Cook rightly remarks, “It is the learners’ involvement, the learners’ strategies, and the learners’ abilities to go their ways that count, regardless of what the teacher is trying to do [25].”



Figure 3: Courtesy: Google images)

2.3. CSRE & the Role of Teachers

Focus on learners doesn't minimize the role of teachers, on the contrary, it extends it manifolds. CSRE approach bestows more sincere effort and responsibilities on language teachers. In general, the teaching profession is a profession that bases much of its methodology on tradition. Many teachers teach one year thirty times instead of teaching thirty different times. There is some degree of security gained from “doing what worked in the past,” however, the 21st century demands that teachers take risks in order to develop strategies that benefit their today's students. In the words of the great educationist, John Dewey, “If we teach today as we taught yesterday, we rob our children of tomorrow.” Teachers should transform their role into that of leaders and coaches as opposed to bosses and disciplinarians. Many researches serve as an outstanding study in support of the teacher as a change agent for the educational process [26, 27]. The teachers are usually seen as:

- LEARNING PHYSICIANS

- SURROGATE PARENTS
- MANAGERS OF LEARNING
- FACILITATORS OF LEARNING
- FARMERS OF LEARNING
- COUNSELORS, GUIDES & FRIENDS
- GREAT MOTIVATORS
- CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE
- ROLE MODELS
- RESOURCE PROVIDERS
- CO-COMMUNICATORS
- GREAT INNOVATORS

Looking at the above roles teachers have been or are playing through the ages, it seems that they are what not personalities. There is no doubt, teachers play an important role in shaping learners' behavior, and motivating them to learn and making them better human beings. They as learning physicians help students to identify their cognitive and affective ailments and suggest courses of treatment. At the same time as agents of social change share the responsibilities to model society in classroom and to promote an ethical learning curriculum in addition to cognitive and affective ones. The teacher-controlled environment, which translates every aspect of life in an educational institution, in fact stifles creativity, and encourages students to abdicate decision-making and problem solving to an authority-figure who prescribes, restricts and evaluates. However "benevolent" such an autocracy might be, and however much this might be deemed to be in the students' "best interests", such a situation cannot be expected to promote and develop critical thinking skills, or a responsible attitude to life and society [28, 29, and 30].

If we take a look at the conditions for learning that were researched and identified by Rogers over half a century ago, it is interesting to note the key words that appear: active, personal meaning, subjective nature of learning, difference, the right to make mistakes, tolerates ambiguity, cooperative, self-evaluation, openness of self, trusted, respected, accepted, permits confrontation.

In other words, teachers can focus their attention on making the classroom into an environment that is conducive to learning. 'Irrespective of teaching method or lesson content, we can make our classrooms into places where students are confident, respected, and motivated'. As can be seen from Kelly's macro and micro-skills of language counseling, this environment will require of the teacher that he/she becomes an affective and cognitive counselor. Once more exciting keywords appear: introducing, promoting, helping, reduce uncertainty, enable, offering advice, suggesting, demonstrating encouragement, reinforcement, constructive reaction. We thus have now a revised view of the teacher as a learning counselor, helping students to feel good about themselves and to maximize their learning potentials.

Teachers can actually make a positive contribution to this situation. They are the people who can model the skills and characteristics of responsible citizens, and can use the micro-society of the language classroom as a model for the greater society that students will meet when they leave school or college. They can focus on the

sort of problem-solving skills and critical thinking skills that students will need when they enter that society, and can create environment in which students can experiment with the social skills that they will need to develop [31]. In short, teachers can promote the sort of positive qualities that are needed in society. Humanists, philosophers and educationalists (e.g. Bruner, Dewey, and Krishnamurti) have been making these points for more than a hundred years, and it is noticeable now that a number of government-based policy statements cite holistic and humanistic principles as educational goals. Teachers are agents of social change and they can do things in the context of humanistic goals through promoting a non-threatening learning environment.

An approach which respects the students and places them at the center of teaching-learning process has an inevitable impact on the lesson content and on teacher / student roles. Thus the teacher being in the background of teaching-learning process, a large variety of activities can occur simultaneously, and the ability of the student to become concerned and committed is an important gauge of growth. Teachers have been portrayed in many different roles so far. Let us now go even further in terms of role change [32].

2.4. CSRE & The Role of Teachers as Co-Learners

CSRE approach adds a new feather into the role-cap of the teachers. This is: the teachers are all the above but above all these, they are CO-LEARNERS. Yes, teachers are co-learners who learn every moment, every second, every minute, every hour, and every day about their students, their problems, the classroom environment, their own teaching techniques and the teaching materials. They learn and improve and it goes on. Yes, teachers are co-learners, ever learners.

They learn with their own students in the classroom. The students learn the language and the teachers learn how best they can facilitate them to learn. In a learner-centered classroom the teacher is very much present as a fragrance that exalts, activates, energizes and relaxes. The teachers' role as co-learners takes the pall of heaviness, strain and stress off the classroom environment, which is a primary factor in the process of learning to take place. Let us give some details what and how the teachers listen, learn, teach and train. They learn about the classroom, their students, their own teaching techniques and the materials used in the class:

□ **Classroom:** The teachers learn about the physical environment of the classroom. They learn whether the size is comfortable, the lighting is sufficient, the cooling is adequate and the ventilation is proper. Even they look at the chairs and tables, white board and markers and initiate process to let them be proper according to the classroom. This gives the classroom a better look and adequate physical environment to learn.

□ **Students:** The teachers observe the students, the class strength, and the seating arrangement. They learn their individual differences, their likes and dislikes, their strength and weaknesses, their aims and goals and also their family background. They even try to know their individual and collective problems, the problems of co-educational class, and the problems of introvert and extrovert students. The teachers learn about their interests, the things, and the matters that motivate them. The better the teachers understand their students, the better they plan their strategies to teach [33].

□ ***Teachers-Methods/Strategies*** : CSRE approach melts the teachers' high and towering stature to a level of co-learners who easily mingle with the students and before choosing any specific course of action or strategy, however, take the time to get to know their students individually at the start of each term. They move around the classroom mixing with other co-learners as friends discussing this and that which in turn give them the feedback they should employ in their teaching methodology. Teachers treat students as partners in the teaching-learning process [34]. Learner autonomy is best achieved when, among other things, teachers act as facilitators of learning, a counselor and as a resourceful friend. To say, though, that learner autonomy can be fostered is not to reduce it to a set of skills that needs to be acquired. Rather, it is taken to mean that the teachers and the learners can work towards autonomy by creating a friendly atmosphere characterized by 'low threat, unconditional positive regard, honest and open feedback, respect for the ideas and opinions of others, approval of self-improvement as a goal, collaboration rather than competition' are the factors what Candy believes and endorses for enhancing learner autonomy. Learner autonomy does not mean leaving learners to their own devices or learning in isolation. 'To posit ways of fostering learner autonomy is certainly to posit ways of fostering teacher autonomy, as 'teachers' autonomy permeates into learners' autonomy' [35, 36, 37, 38 and 39].

2.5. CSRE & Teachers' Autonomy along with Learners' Autonomy

Educational pundits have talked a lot about learners' autonomy but they have written very little about teachers' autonomy. Johnson, Pardesi and Paine strongly believe, "To posit ways of fostering learner autonomy is certainly to posit ways of fostering teacher autonomy, as teachers' autonomy permeates into learners' autonomy." As learners' autonomy is a step further in the direction of motivating the students to achieve their desired goal initiating their own interest and sustaining it, teachers' autonomy gives them the freedom to choose their techniques and materials according to the need of the learners and their goals.

Teachers are ever learners. They learn and experiment in the classroom to improve their teaching and sustain the learners' motivation. Thus the teachers need to be autonomous to freely make a choice of strategies or materials that can charge the imagination of the learners. Prescribed books and norms most of the time hinder teachers to invent and explore the greener pastures where they can do even better justification with their learners as far as their improvement is concerned. This part needs to be discussed and detailed in future.

3. Conclusion

This article concludes the study that has very clearly pointed out that motivation is the key to all learning. Teachers resort to various teaching techniques and strategies to motivate the learners to learn the second language. They are not always successful; on the contrary, it can be said that most of the time they fail in tickling the learners' imagination. Though the teachers employ their best of strategies, the result borders below their expectations, they fail to motivate the students. It does not mean that the teachers are incapable or the techniques used are not proper. This happens because the teachers straightway jump on the business of teaching without prior & proper groundwork. Here comes the CSRE approach, which if the teachers follow, prepares the soil before sowing the seed. If the soil is not ready to receive the seeds to germinate, it will not work. Strategies or materials will not work until the students are prepared for it.

4. Recommendations

The teachers should first care and share about their learners' needs and interests which, in turn, win the confidence and trust of the learners. This proper caring and sharing leads to rapport between the teacher and the taught. This bridges the distance between the teachers and learners and establishes a bond of trust and confidence. The learners, even the slow-learners feel confident and the teacher succeeds in shading off the halo of a teacher that restricts students to freely approach with their problems. Now, they feel that even the teacher is among one of them and their friend.

The soil is ready and the seed of learning will be well accepted by the learners. This groundwork or the platform gives the teachers the launching pad from where they can take their students to any height and sustain their motivation which helps learners to learn the second language. The rapport between the teachers and students fosters the level of motivation and let all act and enjoy the teaching-learning process.

Thus the learners attain autonomy and without any inhibitions approach teachers, discuss with peers and manage their learning of English as a foreign language. Here it would be right to mention that learners' autonomy leads to teachers' autonomy. CSRE approach advocates that teachers' autonomy facilitates learners' autonomy. Teachers can't invent and explore within the boundaries created by fixed techniques, strategies or curriculum. The teachers should have the autonomy to learn and experiment the strategies or materials that they think are in concert with the learner's needs and interests. Old and stereotype techniques and methods lead to boredom and demotivation of learners. Hence, teachers and the concerned educational bodies should follow CSRE approach to let the learners keep up their motivational level high and to facilitate the teaching-learning process.

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